

THE POCAHONTAS TIMES

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CALVIN W. PRICE, Editor.

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It looks like we had to study another history lesson and how I do dread it! Some weeks ago the Hon. John D. Sutton, of Sutton, West Virginia, came to Pocahontas County in a swiftly rolling car and traveled in ease over the roads that he footed so slowly as a soldier in 1863. When he got home he wrote an article about the battle of Droop Mountain, which appeared powerfully to the people of the State, and which was published generally in the papers of West Virginia.

When he came to Marlinton where the state highway crosses the Greenbrier River, he thought it was the place that his command waded the river on Wednesday of the battle. He was mistaken in this, for most of Averell's command marched from Huntersville to the Levels by the Beaver Creek road and waded the river eight miles below Marlinton at the mouth of Beaver Creek.

I wrote Mr. Sutton to refresh his memory about this and also about the statement that his father's history said that Gen. Echols marched his army from Huntersville. That history says that Col. Thompson marched his regiment from Huntersville, which is correct. The Confederate troops had marched from Meadow Bluff in Greenbrier County, marching north to meet the Union army marching south.

I have a letter from Mr. Sutton and in that letter he says he is coming back next spring to examine the battlefield and in the meantime he suggests that I drum up the old soldiers and have them mark temporarily at least the position of the different commands.

There is already a movement on foot to place a monument on the battlefield and I think that will be attended to. And at this time I want here to set down such information as I have in my possession as to the battle and the places occupied by the troops and the movements of the commands at that time.

Of course the battle occurred during a period of a sleep and a forgetting so far as I am concerned, but I have studied it more or less for half a century. I try to be very careful in these historical matters for I sense that the dead know what the living say about matters in which they are concerned. And that death has its disadvantages and precludes communication with the living. The dead are released from sickness, sorrow, pain, and anguish. Their physical powers are gone. They may be able to create thoughts in the living, however, and it may be that some are more susceptible to this influence than others. We do not know, but through his seem very real at times. Pray for an understanding heart and a retentive memory.

The campaign in 1863, in West Virginia, on the federal side was under the command of Gen. W. W. Averell, of the Fourth Separate Brigade. He had at his disposal some five thousand troops and he was opposed to an army of about the same strength. The campaign in the mountains has been ignored by historians generally. The broken country of high hills and narrow valleys prevented the maneuvering of large bodies of troops, but it was no less important than the vast armies on the tidewater plains, for West Virginia was a barrier between the North and the South that the government must hold at all hazards. The federal forces had met with disaster until Averell took charge in the spring of 1863. He was a New Yorker, a West Pointer, countrybred and efficient. He had won his spurs in subduing the Kiowa nation. He could move his troops faster than any other commander, unless it was Stonewall Jackson. He is entitled to be called the Stonewall Jackson of the federal army.

When he came to West Virginia, the first thing that he did was to mount his infantry upon horses and after that he was able to move his army with great rapidity and he moved up and down the long valleys on either side of the Allegheny at will.

He was in many engagements, but the great battle was that of Droop Mountain.

In the first week of November, 1863, he ordered Gen. Duffie to meet him at 2 p. m. November 7th at Lewisburg, and Duffie marched from Kanawha, 120 miles. Averell marched from Beverly and had 110 miles to go. Averell reached Lewisburg on Saturday November 7th, at 2 p. m. and found that Duffie had got there at 10 a. m.

Sunday they started from Beverly and came over Cheat Mountain by way of Cheat Bridge, and marched by Camp Bartow, where they left the Staunton & Parkersburg Turnpike and took the road leading by Green Bank to Huntersville. Outside of some apprehension from bushwhackers, they saw no sign of the rebel army until they got to Green Bank and from there on they drove the pickets before them.

They reached Huntersville on Wednesday at noon, and there Averell heard that Col. W. P. Thompson with the 19th Virginia Cavalry was at Marlins Bottom, at the Greenbrier Bridge. Huntersville was the county seat, and while the pike between the Levels and the county seat ran by Marlins Bottom where the river was bridged, all persons attending court on horseback from the Levels when the river could be forded, turned to the left at Stephen Hole Run and rode by the Beaver Creek Route. They saved by this about six miles, the distance from Marlins Bottom to Huntersville. Marlins Bottom is now called Marlinton. So on Wednesday there was a horse race. Averell sent the 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry and the 3rd West Virginia Mounted Infantry down Beaver Creek to cut off Thompson at Stephen Hole

Run, and sent the 2nd and 9th West Virginia Mounted Infantry to Marlinton with Ewing's Battery. But Thompson left in a hurry and cut a barricade of trees across the road on Price Hill, and beat the federalists to Stephen Hole Run and joined up with the Confederate troops in the Levels and there turned and stopped the advance. There was some cannon firing that day. Averell, at Huntersville, got word in the night time from his command at Marlinton and from Stephen Hole Run, that Thompson had escaped the trap.

Averell moved his Huntersville army down Beaver Creek, Thursday, starting at 3 a. m. and reaching Mill Point at 8 a. m. He had ordered the colonel in charge of the Marlinton army to cut out the barricade and join him at Mill Point, and both wings of the army arrived at the same time. The effect of this was to put the Confederates in motion and they retired from the plains around Hillsboro to the heights overlooking that town, and erected embankments and fortifications on the brow of the mountain overlooking the Levels where the pike tops the mountain going south. It is exactly at the point that the tourist having traveled north through the three miles of sand on the flat top of Droop Mountain, comes in sight all at once spread out some fifteen hundred feet below him. It is a breath taking experience.

Averell says that the reason that he did not attack on Thursday when he came upon the Confederates in the Levels was that he was thirty-four miles from Lewisburg and that if he drove his army forward that day that they would get by Lewisburg before Duffie would have arrived from Kanawha.

On Thursday then about all that was done was to try to go around the Confederates and cut them off from the mountain, but Jackson beat them to and left the Levels to be occupied by Averell.

Averell made his headquarters camp along the hill on the western edge of the Levels about where Gen. M. J. McNeel, of the Confederate Veterans, resides. Averell himself, was the guest of Col. Paul McNeel that night, and the whole community was Confederate but all who met him were charmed by him.

When the Levels was a lake Droop Mountain was the dam. The Greenbrier forced a passage through along the extreme eastern side and still plunges through the pass. Last summer the Road Commission blocked this road just as the army did in sixty-three, and we who desired to march south had to either go down the river road on the right or to the left and climb the ridge and swing round the circle by way of Lobella and climb up the road that intersects the pike on top of the mountain back of the battlefield. They call these Hobson Choice detours these days.

So Averell detoured. Like Stonewall Jackson, he was an early riser, and he got his troops into position before daylight. Here is the way he laid out his attack:

He sent the Fourteenth Pennsylvania to the left and they took up their stand near the Locust Creek bridge and appeared to be ready to charge up the mountain. Keepers Battery was placed on the high ground above Beard's mill and commenced to fire on the batteries on top of the mountain. Several families living in the low place formed by Locust Creek stayed there all day under the artillery fire. Ewing's Battery was placed to the left of the pike between Hillsboro and the foot of Droop Mountain. Gibson's Battalion and the Tenth West Virginia were held in or near Hillsboro on the pike. The Second, Third, and Eighth West Virginia regiments were placed to the right of the pike about the Benick place, out of sight of the Confederates on top of the mountain. The 28th Ohio Volunteer Infantry and one company of the 14th Pennsylvania, in all 1175 men, were sent by the long nine mile detour to the right by Lobella, and while they started long before daylight they did not reach the battlefield until 1:45 p. m. In the meantime a great deal of cannon-firing had been going on.

I imagine that something occurred during the slow morning hours that caused Averell the gravest apprehension. He had not attacked the day before for good and sufficient reasons, but about nine o'clock, the Confederates announced by cheers and by band music, and by the display of battle flags, that Major General Echols had brought his army up and that the forces were equal, and that the Confederates held a safe position.

I have given the position of the federal troops, occupying a full half circle to the north of the battle field. Here is the way the Confederates were stationed:

On the river road to Greenbrier: Edgar's Battalion. On the farm land on the brow of the mountain where the battle was fought: 22nd Virginia Cavalry, Col. Geo. Patton, 19th Virginia Cavalry, Col. W. P. Thompson; 20th Virginia Cavalry, Col. W. W. Arnett; 14th Virginia Cavalry, Col. James Cochran; Derreck's Battalion; Jackson's Batteries and Chapman's

Batteries. On the Lobella-Jacob road: Nobody. The failure to guard this road leading in from the rear cost the Confederates the battle. This oversight has never been explained.

At 1:45 p. m., the flanking party arrived and came through the woods firing as they came and the rifle balls fell every where. It is said to have been one of the most sudden and most fearful fires that men ever subject to. In about an hour, the Confederates were in full flight.

As soon as Averell heard his flanking party commence to fire, he moved the 2nd, 3rd, and 8th regiments obliquely to the right up the mountain. The horses had been left at the foot of the mountain exactly on the left of flanking army and together they advanced on the breastworks of the Confederates and the fight was over in a few minutes, and the army in full retreat. Averell sent Gibson's Battalion after them up the pike, together with one section of Ewing's Battery. But parts of all the regiments joined in the pursuit, and Averell was able to halt his command on the top of Spring Creek Mountain, overlooking the Big Levels of Greenbrier. This was the evening after the battle, Friday, November 6, 1863.

He tried to hold back the pursuit so that Duffie might cut them off at Lewisburg, but that was not to be. They got through Lewisburg and on towards Union on the way to Dublin, by a matter of minutes and were able to cut a timber blockade in the road.

We Confederates never had any luck in West Virginia after the battle of Droop Mountain. It was a losing fight from that time on. We had given Averell a defeat at White Sulphur Springs the summer before, but with that exception, Averell never lost a game. He was allowed to continue in command until the 23rd day of September, 1864, with the most brilliant record for success and efficiency that was ever accorded to a general in a campaign, when for no reason, so far as history can discover, he was summarily dismissed from his command. He openly charged that it was to make room for some favorite in the make up of the army.

His last official communication to his command closed with these words: "I would rather serve in your ranks than leave you, but I am only permitted to say farewell."

During his campaign with the Confederate rangers lasting from May 16, 1862, to September 23, 1864, he fought twenty battles.

That is the outline of the Battle of Droop Mountain. We most earnestly insist that if this sketch is in any-wise in error that the historian or veteran will immediately write to us and we will argue it out.

Here is the panorama that would have been presented to an observer standing on the brow of the mountain on the battlefield just before the battle began: To the east, 14th Pennsylvania regiment; to the north east, Keeper's Battery; to the north Ewing's Battery, and the 10th West Virginia, and Gibson's Battalion; to the northwest, behind the timber and in the sinks and hollows of the land, the 2nd, 3rd, and 8th West Virginia regiments, lying on their arms, every fourth man holding horses, all waiting for the sound of battle; to the west the thick forest through which the 28th Ohio and the company of cavalry were stealing upon the rear.

Nearly all the Levels' homes were occupied that day by the women and children. Nearly all the non-combatant men were hiding in the woods. Col. W. P. Thompson after the war became the great railroad builder and the millionaire of New York. He had discovered his sweaters in the Levels, Mary Evalina Moffett, and he fought the battle of his life in plain view from her home. He had to leave hastily that day but he came back for the wedding and they lived happily ever after. Col. W. W. Arnett became a great lawyer, and

came back to make a whale of a speech against the Republican party at Hillsboro in sight of the battlefield. Col. James Cochran used to tell this tale. He was escaping from the defeat, and he was called on to surrender but paid no attention to the fire and escaped. He said that if the Yankees had said: "Colonel, surrender!" that he would have given up his sword. But when they shouted: "Stop, you damned, red headed, son of a bitch!" It made him so mad that he decided not to surrender.

The famous Confederate Captain Jim McNeill was captured that day. He had had a wonderful record as a brave soldier, the captain of the Nicholas Blues. He was sitting by the roadside a prisoner, engaged in bitter reflections. His brother, a federal soldier, came by. They had not seen each other for a long time. The federal soldier advanced with a warm welcome with his hand extended: "Hello, Jim!" The Confederate looked straight at him and said: "We are not shaking hands today."

My uncle, A. M. McLaughlin, was in that battle. He often told us that as he was escaping he came upon a wounded federal soldier sitting by a log who raised his gun to shoot him and that he, my uncle, sprang in and took the gun away from the soldier, and bent it around a tree and went on. And he would always conclude the story by saying that he would go to Droop Mountain and look for that gun. Years after he did go there and brought back a gun barrel bent like a hoop. The wood part had disappeared but the story was substantiated.

The late Col. John K. Thompson took over the command of the Nicholas Blues that day after Captain McNeill had been captured.

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